



Vaccine Attitudes Focus Groups: Pacific Islanders

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The [Utah Health and Economic Recovery Outreach \(HERO\) Project](#) began in May 2020 as a collaborative statewide testing and analysis project to understand the community-based spread of Covid-19. The goal of the HERO Project is to collect and utilize high-quality local data to help inform decision-makers seeking to guide Utah's citizens and economy through a safe return to normalcy. One year later, the project team is wrapping up its reporting on community testing, impacts of Covid-19 on Utah businesses and consumers, school testing, and vaccine uptake, impact, and implications. This report summarizes and synthesizes focus groups related to vaccines. More information on the HERO Project's past and current work can be found in the project's [previous reporting](#).

Eleven Pacific Islander Utahns participated in two focus groups, each approximately 45 minutes long and including four to seven participants. The focus groups took place in the late spring and early summer of 2021. Researchers from the University of Utah Department of Internal Medicine's Qualitative Research Core worked on behalf of the HERO Project team to identify key themes from the focus group discussions, which formed the foundation for this report.

Key Takeaways

Pacific Islanders had a variety of experiences teaching during the pandemic and equally broad thoughts on the Covid-19 vaccine.

Pacific Islander Experience

- Most participants felt deeply impacted by the pandemic, experiencing changes in their professional and personal lives.
- The risk of exposure was high for most participants, due to living situations or employment. Many tried to reduce risk by following guidelines, including wearing masks and social distancing.

Vaccine Attitudes

- Participants indicated a lack of knowledge about long-term effects as the primary risk of the vaccine, and roughly half of participants were not vaccinated. Benefits of the vaccine included herd immunity, the ability to travel, and easing restrictions.
- All participants felt it was easy to access the vaccine for those that want it, but one did not like the social pressure and incentives to get the vaccine.
- Medical professionals and institutions, researchers, and family and friends were the most trusted source for information regarding the vaccine, while the media was the least trusted source for vaccine information. Participants felt that information was not well communicated, with some only hearing positive information and others only hearing about adverse effects and vaccine theories.

Pacific Islander Experiences and Perceptions of the Vaccine

Pacific Islanders were asked questions regarding their experience during the pandemic, as well as their perceptions of the benefits of risks of the vaccine, their sources of vaccine information, and logistics of receiving the vaccine. Five participants had received at least one dose of the vaccine, while six had received neither dose.

Pacific Islander Experience During the Pandemic

Many of the Pacific Islander participants felt deeply impacted by the pandemic. Several talked about the shutdowns and how these changed their work and daily lives. Participants also mentioned constant testing, wearing masks, and heightened awareness of surroundings.

"So during the first of the pandemic, I was off of work for six weeks, so that was hard. And then now just with the recovery, with things opening up again, socially with church, too, coming back together, just kind of picking up the pieces and trying to figure out how to make up for a year of being isolated pretty much. And so that's kind of a new world to navigate as part of this pandemic."

In addition to feeling the impact of Covid-19, many participants felt they had a high risk of exposure. Increased risk came primarily from being around others, typically due to one's living situation or employment: four participants worked in healthcare. Participants tried to reduce the risk of exposure by following guidelines, social distancing, and increased sanitation.

"I think work is where I'm most likely to be exposed. I work in a clinical lab, and it's just kind of working shoulder-to-shoulder with a lot of different people. So we've been wearing masks since early last year, and we've always had to wear PPE, but that's still always been the place where I'm most likely to be exposed to Covid-19."

"I would consider myself likely, but I think not as, necessarily, as highly likely as others. I am a stay-at-home mom. However, I do also have to do all the errands, and between running kids to school and just doing all the grocery shopping, while my husband's out but we've tried really hard to make sure that we're also social distancing and just only going out for necessary things."

Attitudes on the Benefits and Risks of Getting the Vaccine

Participants identified being able to travel, herd immunity, and easing restrictions as benefits of receiving the vaccine. Additionally, most participants believed the vaccine would not entirely prevent Covid-19, but would significantly lessen the symptoms. One participant expressed uncertainty that the vaccine benefits would last long-term.

"That was my understanding as well, is that doesn't prevent you from getting it, but lessens the symptoms of it and prevents you from hospitalization. Although, I think we're seeing some hospitalized cases that have been vaccinated, so I think just waiting for more information."

When asked about the risks of receiving the vaccine, Pacific Islander participants mentioned side effects such as blood clots, fertility problems, heart inflammation, and migraines. Several talked about the unknowns of getting the vaccine.

"And I think [no long-term studies] is my biggest thing. How I felt last time, if I was that sick—I'm a pretty healthy person and I don't have any underlying conditions. And so I just feel like, if I'm doing that, and then how I got sick and the side effects or the blood clot. I'm just feeling like why risk it, to have those type of effects, when I'm not sick already, you know what I mean? And so I think that's what I'm scared of, is the long term, not knowing what will happen."

Furthermore, roughly half of the participants were unvaccinated and had no plans to get the vaccine. Some participants shared their discomfort with the lack of research available, especially concerning long term effects. Others felt Covid-19 was not a significant threat to themselves and so did not feel the need to receive the vaccine.

"To me, to be honest, it's just I think we need more time. I remember in one of my science classes that they talked about you don't really know the effects of these things for generations. And so I just feel like it's too soon, where I don't feel like I have enough risk factors to need to get it right now. Maybe that would change if more of those risk factors came up, or if I lived with somebody who was very high-risk, I might be more inclined to do it. But I just would like to see more time on there before I make a decision like that."

Seven of the Pacific Islander participants had no attitude change toward the vaccine since the early days of its release. Several held negative attitudes about the vaccine and continued to be wary. One participant looked forward to the vaccine, but more so for those who needed it, as they had no plans of getting the vaccine. Other participants were initially hesitant but became comfortable enough to receive it.

"I think my attitude has stayed the same. At the beginning, I wasn't comfortable in getting it, but I decided to get it just because I work with the public in my work, studying, and then I also was going to be traveling with the elderly. And so I was getting it—that was my decision to get it, just because of that. But then once I had that side effect, then that just confirmed that I should have stuck to my heart and not get it. So, yeah. So I think it hasn't changed."

"I was actually, honestly, pretty convinced I was not going to receive the vaccine. And then after doing a bit of research and kind of just looking over some of the documentation on it, I felt like it was safe enough to go ahead and go forth with it. And then combine that with my job as well as having a high-risk person at home, it just made sense to go ahead and get vaccinated."

Sources of Vaccine Information

Some participants felt they received little information on the vaccine and the only information they had received was advocating for the vaccine. They felt the information was not well communicated and wished for more explicit information on the science of the vaccine.

"To me, I feel the only—it's nothing but positives. You don't hear anything negative about this vaccine at all. And they're not reporting any dangers or side effects. And I just feel it's not being communicated 100% to what the bad parts of it. I feel like it's all just celebrities pushing it and, 'Get vaccinated so you can hug your family.' And I feel like that's all we see. But as far as the medical side of it, I really know nothing. You can't find a lot of information without it being like, 'Oh, this is fake news,' or, 'Fact-checkers haven't—this isn't real.' So I don't know what to believe at this point."

Conversely, other participants reported hearing many adverse effects and theories on the vaccine. A couple of participants heard many get bad symptoms after the second dose of the vaccine. Some heard from others about the vaccine being a way of mind control, causing depopulation through infertility, being filled with metal, or having a chip in it.

Pacific Islander participants also used a variety of sources to get information. Some trusted the CDC, WHO, and university medical staff. Others did not trust government entities but instead researchers, family, community members, and local medical staff. Participants did not trust social media or highly politicized media for accurate information. One participant noted it was difficult to navigate the changing information throughout the pandemic, making it hard to know where to get credible information.

"I think that actually has been a difficult thing for me to navigate just because this is the first time that the world has encountered Covid-19, this strain, right? And so you have to have a lot of grace for the people, the public health officials who are dealing with this because they're trying to protect the public as a whole, but they're also learning things too. And so you can see the way the information has changed throughout this whole pandemic. And so it's good to have an official person to go to like the CDC or the WHO, but then also to keep in mind that that information is changing."

Participants had many conversations with family and friends about the vaccine; family and friends were often misinformed and had mixed opinions on the vaccine, which pushed participants to be diligent in their own research. Some participants also spoke with their doctors, but some participants were uninsured and unable to get a professional opinion.

"I've had them go both ways, really good, and I've had them turn south too, where we're total disagreement on things. And I'm open to listening to different facts. And it was actually one of my friends who's a doctor. He was the one who we kind of got into a heated discussion with, the vaccines. Because I had posted something about it, and he totally ripped me apart with how I could be unsafe, and I'm selfish. I've kind of covered all the spectrums with conversations."

Logistics of Receiving the Vaccine

All Pacific Islander participants believed the vaccine was easy to access for those who wanted it. One acknowledged the only obstacle they noticed was in scheduling availability. Another participant mentioned that the extra vaccines created fewer limitations on who could receive the vaccine early on. One participant did not like the incentives for getting the vaccine and found the moralization of the vaccine "strange."

"I think the availability of it has been great for those who do want it. Sometimes, I feel the wording, and like I said earlier, the incentives of what they're pushing for people to get it, it's just very odd to me. I read an article today with the governor saying, 'Well, they wouldn't have died if they had chosen to get the vaccine,' because the infection rate right now is obviously hitting those who are non-vaccinated, and that was actually a statement, and I was kind of taken back, like, 'Well, a lot of people aren't comfortable with it,' but they're moralizing if you are not or if you are vaccinated then, 'Yay.' Even at my employment, you can order a shirt that says, 'Yay, I'm vaccinated.' To me, I think it's just very strange."

Other Considerations

Participants with additional thoughts emphasized the need for information on the vaccine's side effects and wished officials were more transparent about the imperfections of the vaccine.

"I just wish our officials would be a little bit more transparent with everything and not just to try to make it like this perfect vaccine, because we know it is not."

Next Steps

HERO Project will continue to publish reports summarizing focus groups held with Utahns of various communities and identities. These reports will help to inform the state's reflection, evaluation, and adaptation of their pandemic response with regard to public perception, concerns, and experiences receiving the Covid-19 vaccine.

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